

I'm Kris.

You may know me as new caretaker to displaced office worker and Perfect Fluffy Boy Ivan the cat, or maybe we met when I headed Charity at the first MAGWest or co-chaired the most recent MAGLabs, or maybe you helped me push an arcade cabinet onto a dolly in 2009. Thanks for that. Truthfully I've never been a big decision maker in MAGFest; I've just kind of been Around for a while, hopping between departments, helping on as many promo trips and loads as I could, and being sporadically active on Slack (and IRC, once upon a time). I wonder, though, if that doesn't give me something in common with many of you reading this.

### **Why should I care about this?**

MAGFest's high-level corporate M.O. feels abstracted away from us and our work when we're hunting down power strips or pulling up gaff tape, it's true. What makes or breaks a single shift is probably how attendees or DHs treat us, not whether an employee's disciplinary plan was mishandled. For a staffer like me, it's hard both to grok the wider implications of a board decision and to feel informed enough to have an opinion on it. Perhaps harder still to accept the story of a bunch of letter-writing rebels stirring up drama.

But I've been Around long enough to assure you that the actions of this board matter *a lot* and affect *all* staff. The current board inappropriately exercises hiring and firing power over paid employees and the power to pull on- and offline permissions for volunteers. The employee or staffer who gives your department the most support could be gone in an instant with little or no process if the board made that call. Even if you don't work closely with the board yourself, someone who makes decisions about your budget, hours, layouts, contracts, and staff conflicts is expected to report to them. More abstractly, they're meant to set the tone for communications and guide the culture of MAGFest forward. Ideally, we would hold the MAGFest Board up as our ultimate standard for transparency, humility, compassion, progress, preparedness, and fairness.

So, does the board meet that standard?

Look at the names in this drive. Look how many rational, competent, empathetic, honest people have been brought to the brink. Almost certainly, you or someone you work closely with deeply respects and has been greatly helped by one or more of the letter writers. Every one of them has demonstrably contributed to the events and supported the volunteers who make it happen. They love MAGFest - they are doing this to protect and cherish it. They know that you have a right to this information, a right to make up your own mind, a right to be represented at the highest level.

I have been friendly with most of the members of the board, I hope they'd agree, for the better part of a decade. I've watched them handle fantastically stressful, trying situations. I've defended them from criticism and believed them when they said they were going to do better. I've gone to them for help in sensitive harassment situations. I've lip-synch-battled them (they rocked). I bear them no ill will as individuals and I don't doubt each and every one has worked *extremely* hard for MAGFest, both on the board and in other capacities. I hope any of them reading this will take what I have to say in the spirit of honest discourse that they've always endorsed and not as a salting of the earth. Similarly to Dac, it's difficult for me to write this, knowing it might hurt and alienate people I respect, but our earnest aim is to prevent further hurt and alienation that threatens this one-of-a-kind community.

I'm sorry to say, the board has been made aware of these issues already and shown no satisfactory improvement. We propose drastic change by December 20th in part to avoid condemning MAGFest to more of the same vague promises that come without an actionable timeline and inevitably fizzle from memory.

It may be pointed out in response to these letters that the board is not a monolith - so far, I don't know of one, but I strongly encourage any member willing to condemn these distasteful behaviors to make a statement.

## Personal Interest over Public Interest

It can be hard to be sure what the board is spending their work time on (as we'll explore next section), but we can surmise from this drive that quite a lot of it is dedicated to personal vendettas with little or no relevance to the health of the organization they are supposed to govern.

We see this in the disciplinary persecution of Events Director and former Interim Executive Director Debra Lenik, who most of you will agree ranks among the most competent, helpful, and uncontroversial figures in the history of MAGFest leadership. Debra has been instrumental in the improvements you may have noticed to MAGFest's internal communications and documentation (just look at her Slack analytics!), as well as its tangibly increased attention to safety, accessibility, and diversity. Ask the staff about Debra and you'll hear story after story of her going out of her way to fix issues big and small with a respectful and professional manner. She's an asset any organization would be beyond foolish to throw away and it's *astonishing* to watch the board formally reprimand her with the implicit threat of job loss over what, to me, clearly constitute paranoid misinterpretations of innocuous statements, sprinkled with downright falsehoods.

Read Debra's letter and the disciplinary notice and decide for yourself. Does this situation read to you like a raging, disrespectful employee the board had no choice but to reprimand for her "demeaning" comments against them, or a petty, bad-faith waste of time over non-issues by a secrecy-obsessed group that scans every statement for hypothetical criticism and views criticism as insubordination?

We also know of at least one *vital* issue that has either been ignored or handled with ineffectual tepidness: the behavior and performance of the new Executive Director. This is the man and ex-officio board member who shortly into his tenure [launched into a defensive, personal-insult-laden series of tirades over some polite feedback from volunteers in a public Slack channel](#). You may have been charmed by his friendliness and surface-level belief in good practices, as I was, but all six

full-time MAGFest employees have filed HR complaints against him. You can see in the other letters the atmosphere of manipulation - I would argue gaslighting and verbal abuse - that those working directly under him have been forced to endure, on top of the other stresses of 2020. His refusal to study available, purpose-crafted documents, his demands that the employees repeatedly guide him through basic workflow at the expense of their own time, his affrontedness at the slightest disagreement, and his completely unjustified outbursts (now strategically done in private) have wrung the employees out. They have overexerted themselves to deliver the top-quality work MAGFest expects while having their time and energy sapped by their own boss. The work may not be suffering, but the people undeniably are.

The board is aware of this ongoing problem and we can assume they have met with the ED and perhaps implemented a Personal Improvement Plan or other official disciplinary process, but the complaints were filed in the summer and employees have received only sparse updates (see Debra's letter) while little or no improvement has been made to these awful working conditions. Given the ED's insistence on spending much of his time meeting with the board, and their shared distaste for public discussions, it may come as no surprise that they would prioritize his "potential" over months of employees' mental health at work.

Not one of the currently serving members was elected by the volunteer body and most have been serving since incorporation. This is an issue the elections were designed to help correct, but as we've seen in Shir's letter, the board's respect for the election process is minimal. A board committed to the public interest of MAGFest would have prepared for the elections with an actual plan and then taken the results and their obligation to the staff seriously.

## **Secrecy over Transparency**

For a group that loves to wax poetic about the importance of communication,

how easily can you discover what the board is up to at a given time? [Meeting agendas](#) are short and vague and [meeting minutes](#) are released long after the fact (the 2020 folder is still entirely empty as of this November writing). The board seems to have a pattern of discouraging public discussion, pushing DMs and other maximally private communication even when the subject is not sensitive, or other viewpoints would be helpful.

Note how many of Debra's "offenses" were just commenting on something to do with the board in front of people other than the board.

## **Bonding over Boundaries**

An expectation has been set by and for the board that members subject themselves to [many hours of emotionally grueling, "mosh-pit-style" meetings](#), both as part of the onboarding process and on an ongoing basis afterwards. This appears to be a remnant from MAGFest's cultural history that we would do well to leave behind. I believe, and hope, that this organization is moving towards healthier boundaries. How many times have we had to discuss burnout, how many people have left MAGFest for good after investing too much of their lives into it with no other support system? Stories of board meetings (see Shir's and Josiah's letters) paint a picture of an insular group therapy setting at best, meting out of one-sided verbal punishment at worst.

Therapy and emotional support are important things, but combining them with mandatory work tasks is a very messy business. The friendly and therapeutic aspects of board meetings are not framed as a bonus of the work, but as a requirement. It's clear to me that the board has refused to add the new members-elect because they will not onboard someone who is not a potential close friend. They wanted Shir and Josiah to prostrate themselves and lay bare their private emotional issues before they could tolerate working with them, and present that process as a prerequisite to the work they do. Neither Shir nor Josiah is a stranger to blunt criticism or workplace hostility and they can take a

heck of a lot more punishment than I ever could, but you can see how draining and demoralizing this experience has been for them, two people with a robust track record of improving MAGFest who made the mistake of having personal boundaries.

Staffing MAGFest is a terrific way to make friends, as it should be. Nevertheless, it is work, and it's okay to have colleagues you like working with but wouldn't invite on a deep dive into your trauma. A work culture where you can make friends is nice, a work culture where you *must* make friends is a recipe for abuse and burnout. As the highest office holders in the MAGland, the board *must* model respect for boundaries - their own and others'.

## **Defensiveness over Diversity**

Let's review two items from Debra's disciplinary notice that concern diversity. Remember that these are cited as "behavior that requires improvement" demonstrating that Debra is "unable to effectively communicate with and about others" as part of a formal document in her personnel file.

**d-ii) "Being confrontational with the Secretary of the Board during a Board Meeting about diversity on the board in the context of a volunteer's candidacy and those people's dismissal of the General Counsel being a Board Member."**

Of the eight voting and nonvoting members of the board, six are white men.\* All seven voting members are men. This is probably what prompted Josiah to casually refer to it in his BOD candidacy announcement as "a board of white dudes." That phrase merited a qualifier - the board may be overwhelmingly white dudes, and easily mistaken for *only* white dudes, but it is not entirely, less visible diversity exists, some progress away from Total Whitedudery has been made, and the contribution of the members who aren't white dudes is worth acknowledging. This fact was pointed out by those two members [in the #election Slack channel](#)

several days after Josiah's announcement. Fair enough. At which point Mark Murnane, who has attended innumerable board meetings and is very familiar with their bylaws and documentation, commented "I honestly didn't know you were on the board. I knew you were present at every meeting and had regular input, but I didn't realize you actually had a vote as an ex-officio member until checking Notion just now. (Though to be fair, the most recent notes still list you as a guest.)" to the above mentioned General Counsel, who is actually the only nonvoting member. Fair enough. An information gap was found and corrected.

Privately, the board then expressed intent to demand an apology from both Josiah and Mark, specifically for "dismissing" that nonvoting member - Debra's refusal to enforce this demand earned her the disciplinary item above.

\*of course not the only two relevant axes of identity here but since the offending phrase was "white dudes" I'm working off that.

**a-iii) "In a phone call with the PR Team, you mentioned the Board was unequipped to handle difficult and safe-like issues and that is why you prefer to go through other channels."**

Even if this were true I would find it a suspicious choice for formal discipline, but Debra's actual comments were simply about her practice of soliciting further diverse input on PR matters relating to diversity, in addition to the board's input.

Corporate diversity is a different beast from the methodical course correction of power imbalances that we attempt in social politics, but the latter can help guide the former in some key ways, I like to think. First, there is probably never a point at which you are "done" pursuing diversity, or learning about it. The diversity-minded professional acknowledges that they are not qualified to weigh in on every conceivable identity issue, and that in order to better understand a marginalized group they must hear from (many) members of the group itself. Second, they try to always stay aware of how power affects their relationships and builds the connotations of the things they say, and to use their power to

strategically amplify the power and access of others.

To me, the first scenario above represented a perfect opportunity for the board to reaffirm their appreciation of what diversity they have, publicize a member status they had not yet adequately documented, *and* admit that they had a long way to go, taking advantage of the election spotlight to demonstrate an eagerness to move forward. They managed only the first two, followed by a transfer of guilt for their homogenous image onto other volunteers. Rather than "we actually aren't all white dudes, but we could still stand to be more diverse! We encourage candidates from outside the realm of whitedudeliness!" the message was "we actually aren't all white dudes," arguably with the implied "so the board is diverse enough already." No, no member actually made that claim, but focus was drawn from the topic at a crucial period.

I wouldn't condemn the board for some imperfect messaging alone, but to mention this in Debra's disciplinary notice indicates a defensiveness on the subject of their own accountability for diversity. It's not that the *board* failed to prioritize their ex-officio member, they say, it's the volunteers' fault for being willfully "dismissive" of information they did not have. The second disciplinary item takes it even further: wanting to hear from *more than just us* on matters we might not know much about is not only an insult, but *an insult worth an official reprimand for your file*. If you say the board, this group of eight people, seven white, seven men, is not every perspective you need on every conceivable diversity issue, you are "not [being] collaborative or appropriate."

Ask yourself: Do these sound like the actions of a group of people who are working hard to make progress on diversity? Can you say with confidence that each member is constantly educating themselves to better understand and serve the range of needs of the MAG community, as becomes their office?

I'll leave you with a "lighthearted" comment made by a board member in a private channel only two months ago:



[REDACTED]  
I had never actually heard the term mansplaning until just over a week ago when I saw the viva la dirt league skit on it (yes, I live under a rock, but don't we all now?). I thought to myself, hmmm... My gf is so much more knowledgeable about fixing things... Is there a term when a woman mansplains to a guy? 🤔

*Message reads: I had never actually heard the term mansplaning [sic] until just over a week ago when I saw the viva la dirt league skit on it (yes, I live under a rock, but don't we all now?). I thought to myself, hmmm... My gf is so much more knowledgeable about fixing things... Is there a term when a woman mansplains to a guy? :rolling\_on\_the\_floor\_laughing:*

## **Meandering Grandstanding Conclusion (a passion the board and I have in common)**

I want to acknowledge again that the board members have clearly toiled and suffered for this work, and I very much include reading page after page of complaints about yourself, for those who do so. But harder and more miserable work is not the same thing as effective or necessary work. It's a lesson I've had to learn more than once myself, having realized that *no one was asking* for the emotional labor I was volunteering at the expense of my health, or that those who *were* asking for it would never stop asking. You can never receive enough positive feedback to make depleting your entire self satisfying. To me, this is why the board seems to have grown so suspicious of anything other than fawning appreciation - they have worked themselves into a state of extreme emotional vulnerability without the healthy breaks and distance that would have let them see comments from Debra, Shir, Josiah, Mark, and others for the earnest, innocent, *normal* actions they were.

I'm not comfortable with the idea of firing someone for their own good - it's patronizing, and the reason we're asking them to step down is because we believe they're persistently acting in a way that harms the MAGFest community - but my honest empathetic response to seeing the actions of these people I've known and liked for years is that they seem like they *need* a rest and a change of focus. No one needs them to suffer this much, *and* we need things from them they seem

unwilling to provide. I believe their self-sustaining insular environment has created an alternate reality that each of them could masterfully identify as BS if they weren't stuck inside it. I've been in that situation too - I've found myself stuck in an unfamiliar logic loop without remembering how I came into it, especially when my focus and memory issues collide with my desire to be rhetorically consistent, whee. The best antidote for this, I think, is careful examination of evidence like you've seen in these letters. So:

What do you think happened? Why do you think it happened? What feelings (also important) can you link to what events?

The board have demonstrated that they would have preferred this evidence and this criticism be hidden from you. We think you have the right to see it. You *are* MAGFest after all.

Kris (@Boogerghost) - she/her

As thanks for taking the time to read these letters, enjoy this photo of Ivan out of

his mind on catnip:

